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THE NETTLE

By HAROLD JAMES BARRETT

It was nearly six-thirty when Isabel Tasker closed her notebook with a click of the elastic and snapped out the light above her typewriter. She stepped to the mirror over the washstand to adjust her hat with a couple of jabs and slipped into her last year's coat. Powell, the sales manager of the Excelsior Sash and Door Company, had been late in his dictation, which in turn had kept Isabel a half hour after the office closing time. Only she and Whitten, the bookkeeper, remained. He peered owl-ishly at her through his steel-rimmed spectacles as she bade him good-night in passing his tall desk.

Whitten was a gentle, kindly, timorous soul who it seemed must have been born in bondage to a set of books. To the girl's fancy it appeared in some metaphysical fashion, by some psychic blood transfusion, the books grew bloated and bulky at his expense; that as the loose-leaved volumes gained in weight, he lost in vitality. He possessed an almost morbid interest for her. He was obviously so hopelessly ensnared, so resigned to his shabby destiny of walking to save carfare, of wearing frayed collars, of making a hat last two and even three years.

"Poor old Whitten," she reflected as she walked down the stairs. "How many evenings he puts in on those books. And all he gets is seventy-five cents supper

money. I wonder if he ever had any ambition? They say he has an ailing wife and four children. I should think that some spring day he'd put on his hat and walk away from it all — like Mr. Polly."

People were always reminding Isabel of characters in the books which she secured from the Public Library.

At the landing she stopped a moment to watch the stream of commuters which swept down Portland Street toward the North Station. There was something theatrical about the lighting at that hour of the November day and as she stood in the obscurity of the stairway, a strange mood fell upon her, an odd sense of impersonality, serene and restful, as though she were a god observing the antics of the puppets he had created.

The day had been jangling; most of her days were. The monotony of her work, the strain of dictation, the petty tyranny of Haskell, the office manager, a school-teacherish martinet, wore upon her. She had been broken to the harness of business routine too recently to accept the yoke philosophically. Life in her dreams could be so rich, so spacious. But for the moment this all dropped away. She was free.

The mood passed and yet it was with a sense of relaxation that she opened the door and started for the elevated station.

At Sullivan Square she changed to a surface car and fifteen minutes more brought her to her street in the sodden Boston suburb in which she had spent the twenty years of her life.

She climbed heavily to the third floor. The Taskers had the top apartment in the three-decker and the ride home clinging to a swaying strap had tired her.

"Hello, Father," she said indifferently as she entered.

Charles Henry Tasker, a sandy, perky little man in his early fifties, sat primly in an uncomfortable stuffed arm-chair reading the *Morning Globe*. He thought it an extravagance to buy two newspapers daily, so skimmed

the news at breakfast and reread the same paper more thoroughly during the evening. Scanning his neighbor's headlines on his homeward trip kept him in touch with the current day's events. Tasker's salary as collector for an installment furniture house did not permit of riotous living.

"Late, ain't you, Belle?" he demanded.

"Yes, Mr. Powell held me up in my work. But it wasn't his fault."

Her father's unremitting surveillance annoyed the girl though she realized that it was but evidence of the emptiness of his mind. It was petty curiosity, nothing more sinister.

"Boiled dinner," she remarked, wrinkling her straight little nose disapprovingly as she took off her hat. She hated it, and Mrs. Tasker, who lacked imagination, included the odorous meal in the family menu all too frequently.

She walked back to the kitchen.

"Oh, Belle," exclaimed her mother fretfully, speaking from a column of steam like Aladdin's genii; "do finish setting the table. I'm clean up to my neck," and with a clatter of pans she plunged into the intricacies of synchronizing the final convergence of all the factors of the dinner.

Mrs. Tasker was a nervous, whining wisp of a woman with angular elbows and a sharp, snooping nose. A New Englander of Cape Cod stock, a burden which lay heavy upon her soul was that the neighborhood, almost purely American when they had moved in nearly twenty-five years ago, had been ruined by a steady infiltration of Irish. She resented their race, their religion, their wastefulness as she termed it—and particularly their success. She disliked to see the second generation practising law or medicine or holding executive positions in business.

Isabel completed the task, then entered her own room.

Here she had made a futile attempt to create a setting which would in some degree reflect herself. Upon the walls of neutral buff hung some blithe German prints. Whistler's "Portrait of My Mother," a couple of Abbey's Holy Grail series and, of course, Sargent's "Prophets". The latter had no genuine appeal for her but she thought it must be good and had persuaded herself that she enjoyed it. On the floor was a pink Wilton rug. The brass bed, however, was cheap and with its green medallions unnecessarily ornate. The maple dresser, purchased at a discount from the Washington Street concern by which her father was employed, had ugly contours. The handicap was too great. The room was a failure and she knew it. But all things are relative; and, compared to the stark horror of the other rooms, furnished largely with pieces reminiscent of the eighties and inherited by Tasker at his mother's death, it was an oasis.

A few minutes later they sat down to their evening meal. Tasker mumbled a blessing and they fell to; the man voraciously, for like so many small men he had a robust appetite, the women more delicately. The talk ran on the cost of living, a burden attributed by Charles Tasker to the high wages of manual labor. Though he was paid but twenty-eight dollars a week, he felt himself far superior to artisans, and their earnings were a constant irritant to him.

"No one knows better than me how they spend their money," he asserted querulously as he speared a turnip. "Buying furniture fit for a banker on Beacon Street. It's the unions, that's what does it. They won't do a full day's work and they want all the money in the world. But now the paper says business is slackening, a lot of men are gettin' out of work. That'll teach 'em a lesson." He seemed pleased at the thought of the impending commercial depression.

Mrs. Tasker felt that immigration was to blame.

"These ignorant foreigners," she explained, serving her husband with another helping of parsnips, "never had anything in their own country and come over here expectin' to live like lords. But now the Republicans are goin' in things'll be better."

The Taskers were staunch Republicans, had always been.

Isabel contributed little. She sat, as usual, silent and repressed.

"You're so moody," her mother complained. "I can't make head nor tail of you. You must need a tonic."

"But I've had a hard day's work," she defended. "We all earn our money in that office, I'll tell you."

Isabel was one of Mrs. Tasker's grievances. She was so uncompanionable. As a child, imaginative and fanciful, the girl had often indulged in that favorite day dream of children that she was a changeling. Now that she was grown there seemed grounds for giving the theory credence. For one thing, as the family album bore damning testimony, there had never been a Tasker nor a Putney with any claim to beauty. Yet Isabel, had she been happy, would with her dreaming brown eyes and clear skin have been pretty.

Then, too, her mind and interests had so outstripped her parents' petty little world that she felt almost a stranger to them. Nor had she progressed far enough to embrace them in that philosophic tolerance which she might some day achieve. They irritated her and too often she and her mother fell into acidulous bickerings. Congenial companionship would have sweetened the girl's nature but she had not one real friend. She was driven in upon herself and became morbid and introspective.

"Is Eddie comin' 'round tonight?" inquired Tasker as they arose.

"Yes, we're going to the movies," Isabel replied without enthusiasm.

She hastened to clear the table with its litter of soggy, malodorous vegetables. She had the dishes wiped, and made a pretty picture in a simple black frock relieved by white yoke and cuffs, when Eddie Stoddard arrived.

Eddie was the only child of the neighborhood milkman and was a catch. A pale, fattish youth with pale eyes, projecting ears and light eyelashes, he had no vices. He did not even smoke. When he had completed high school, where his reputation as a sneak had made him unpopular, there had been some talk of his going to Dartmouth. But upon investigation it had been impossible to discover how the curriculum focussed in any way upon administering the milk route, and the idea was abandoned. He and Isabel had been school mates. There was an unexpectedness about her which intrigued him.

One day she had demanded imperiously, "Edwin, why *does* the milkman shudder at the coming of the dawn?" Edwin had never heard of Dunsany nor for that matter had anyone within a radius of some miles.

He had been "going with" Isabel for two years or more and although his mother had hoped he would do better, the Stoddards were resigned to the thought of the affair.

Edwin sat down in the living room to talk with Tasker while Isabel prinked.

"I haven't seen your father at church lately," accused Tasker. His interest in the local Baptist church was deeper than religious. It was the arena in which he had gained fame. Every Sunday for many years past he had stood on the platform in the vestry and led the singing for the Sunday School, lacerating the stuffy air with rancous bellowing of "Hold the Fort," "Throw Out the Life Line," and other stirring hymns. As a little girl, Isabel used to stare in fascinated wonder at the cords of his lean throat as they swelled with the effort.

"No, Pa's been a slacker," admitted Edwin. "He thinks it's up to Ma to hold up the family reputation.

But now winter's coming on he'll show up, that is unless the trains get in late."

The calendar of the male Stoddards revolved about the arrivals of the milk train which their delivery wagons met in the small hours.

"Well, I think there never was a time when us Americans ought to be more regular in our church attendance. What with this newspaper talk and all," but Tasker's theory was interrupted by Isabel's entrance and the young people left the older man to his nightly duty of balancing his personal expense account. Seldom perhaps did a family spend so little with so much intricate accounting.

A walk of a few blocks brought them to the theatre. The film was Chambers' "Fighting Chance," a sumptuous production, the lead filled by a slender, well-bred, good-looking young fellow who acted with quiet naturalness. To Isabel, starved for beauty, for leisure, for the amenities of life, it was an orgy of sensation.

She was twenty. She did not realize that the life of material wealth and ease spread before her was in essence quite as empty and arid as her own. She gave herself utterly to the spell of the film and for an hour or more sat oblivious of time, of Edwin, of the drab rôle to which she had been assigned by destiny. She was completely submerged in the mimic world of Long Island country estates, English butlers, Wall Street turns and that aesthetic beauty which wealth today, though it may not always comprehend, at least knows how to conscribe.

At the final fade-out, she sat staring into space for a few moments until recalled with a shock to reality by Edwin's prodding. As they walked home past shoddy shops and dingy wooden dwellings, most of them jerry-built structures erected during the seventies and eighties, she was silent and distraught. Edwin, who cherished an impartial jealousy for all the actors whom they saw together, indulged in a diatribe against the loose lives of the smart set.

"That's why I'm for Prohibition," he asserted self-righteously. "Look at that fellow tonight. Look what drink did to him."

But Isabel scarcely heard. As her mood of exaltation subsided, a cloud of self-pity descended.

"Don't you ever feel that you've got to get away from all this, Edwin?" she suddenly demanded, and with a vague wave of the hand she indicated the Chinese laundry, the fire house, the bakery, the whole unkempt, unlovely locality which in its physical aspect seemed to Isabel so fitly to express the meagre aspirations, the sordid ideals of its inhabitants.

Edwin gazed uncomprehendingly.

"'Twouldn't do me any good. I'm like a doctor, you know. Here we've got this milk route. It's taken Pa twenty years to build it up. We couldn't move."

The fact was that the Stoddards were perfectly content. They owned one of the best houses in the neighborhood, a hybrid eyesore covered with fancy shingles, representing American suburban taste of thirty-five years ago. All things are relative, and they enjoyed their position as the nabobs of the section.

Isabel did not reply. When they reached her door, Edwin sought to exact a kiss. She had never thrilled, even faintly, to his caresses. Tonight she sickened at the thought.

"Oh, no, Edwin!" she gasped and with a hurried good-night ran up the steps. He thought it was coquetry and grinning complacently started homeward.

Isabel found the house in darkness, for her father in his thrift never left a light for her. A snore assured her that her parents slept. She lighted the lamp and sat for some time musing. The mean little room with its Land-seer engravings, its bookcase containing some fifteen or twenty cheap novels of a former generation bought by her mother in her sentimental period, its down-at-the-heel pretense at gentility, all this faded away. She relived the evening's emotions.

"If only I could get to New York," she thought. "Anything might happen there. Nothing ever could here. It just couldn't!" And yet her heart beat timorously at the thought of the metropolis. Twenty years of living with Charles Tasker, with his ever present and perhaps justifiable fear of destitution, had not made for a courageous attitude.

New York! The girl could not say when the idea had first been born, but for three or four years, ever since she had begun consciously to resent her environment, it had been a constantly recurring challenge. Once she had picked up from a news-stand a radical magazine published in New York, the personal mouthpiece of a brilliant, cosmopolitan man of letters, for years editor and proprietor of a literary magazine in London; the man who had brought out Wells and Shaw. He told about his reading Emerson's "Self Reliance" when a briefless young lawyer in a bleak, windswept Kansas town, and how as a result he had sold his few poor sticks and had sailed for Europe. She had then secured a copy of Emerson from the public library, and the message had seemed directed to her personally. Isabel was the type of girl who, had she possessed a trace of talent, would have formed one of that group of intense young egotists who comprise Bohemia in our larger centres. But she had no power of expression. And yet her reading of "Self-Reliance" had confirmed her in her longing for a life somewhere, sometime, which would yield her some measure of content.

Once, a year or so ago, she had brought up the subject of New York at the table. Her mother had looked at her in blank amazement; her father had flown into one of those rages in which he vented upon his women folk the slights he received during his daily calls upon delinquent debtors.

The old-fashioned black marble mantel clock, a Tasker heirloom, struck eleven, and with a sigh the girl extinguished the light and tip-toed to her room.

During the Great War, Isabel had read in some magazine about a youth who, volunteering for balloon observation work, found himself utterly incapable, when his turn came, of plunging from the basket to carry messages to terra firma. Every time he had to stand upon the edge in an agony of indecision and be pushed off by his companions. It had made a deep impression upon her; somehow she understood that boy.

It was a combination of circumstances which pushed Isabel on to a train for New York a few days later. And as she settled herself in her seat on the shoreward side of the day coach, she felt quite as helpless as though she were hurtling through space awaiting the delayed opening of a parachute.

Friday, Haskell, the office manager, had been more than usually offensive in criticising some slight error. Friday evening she had had a squalid quarrel with her father over the purchase of a new coat. The man had begun to fear that the business depression might endanger his own position and with a blind, instinctive reaction fought every proposal which involved any expenditure. Most of the girl's earnings were turned into the family fund and she often had difficulty in retaining enough to dress adequately.

On this occasion he had referred bitterly to the accumulated expense of her support throughout her childhood. He was working himself into an incoherent rage when suddenly he dropped back into his chair, speechless, clawing impotently at his throat. Mrs. Tasker was frightened.

"Dr. Hillis says his blood pressure is terrible high," she fluttered. "Do get out for a piece."

Isabel's impulse was to walk out of the jangling discord never to return.

Saturday noon she and one other stenographer were laid off until business picked up. Her heart sank, for she feared it would be difficult to find another open-

ing. And the thought of facing her father's despair, her mother's inevitable conclusion that in some way disgrace attached to the occurrence, was sickening.

In lieu of notice, her employers gave her a week's pay in advance. Upon her arrival home, she said nothing. Sunday she pretended illness, and while her parents were at church she packed her battered straw suitcase, took a car to Sullivan Square, and checked it. She was late in returning but said she had been out to the drug store for headache tablets. That night she lay awake wondering if she would have the courage to go through with her resolution.

Monday morning she started for the city at the usual time. She left a brief note in the letter box downstairs saying that she was going to New York to find work; secured her suitcase; stopped at the savings bank on School Street where she had seventy-two dollars deposited, which with her extra week's pay gave her ninety-two dollars; and bought a ticket for the metropolis.

As the train roared onward, she pictured her mother's alarm upon discovering her message. She was sure to find it during the day, for whether or not the postman rang she always peered inquisitively into the box whenever she came in. Then with a flash of optimism, she saw herself returning some day, happy and successful, a distinguished writer, perhaps, or a bride linked at last to that shining being of her fancy whose sole resemblance to Edwin Stoddard was his sex. Then her desperate venture would be vindicated. But she would not return until her position was solidly buttressed. Any half achieved triumph might succumb to the baneful influence of that atmosphere.

As the day wore on, however, this mood passed and as she alighted at the Grand Central, she felt as she looked, timid and frightened. She dared not trust herself to the intricacies of the subway but took a Fourth Avenue surface car to 29th Street where she secured a room at the Martha Washington.

A hurried splash to remove the train dust and she was out agape at the city. It was cloudy and the Metropolitan tower was ablaze. With something of the artist in her, Isabel drank in the beauty of the square softened by the luminous shadows of the November twilight.

So that was the Garden and that the Tower, and there was where the Victory Arch stood which she had seen in the movies. And all she asked was a niche in this stupendous, dynamic, unbelievable machine, New York; a little niche which would supply her with the bare necessities plus the privilege of living her own life away from the stultifying bleakness of her home. At the thought she sought out a news-stand and bought a copy of each evening paper, seven in all. She carried them back to her hotel and left them in her room, planning to go through the classified columns that evening, seeking a room and a job.

Then she penciled a message to her mother on a picture postcard announcing her safe arrival but giving no address, and went downstairs to eat. She dined in a nearby Childs' restaurant. But before assailing her task she could not resist the allure of upper Broadway and as she emerged from the subway, Times Square burst upon her like a conflagration.

Oh, to be a part of it all! The dull sanctimony of her home had robbed Isabel of her childhood religion and she believed herself to be an agnostic. Otherwise she could have prayed for the success of her venture as she stood marveling at the glory of the colossal chewing gum sign which dominated the scene in blatant splendor. The girl felt lifted out of herself, drunk with the wine of freedom, eternally insulated against that grizzly past which for the moment seemed but an evil spell from which she had suddenly and miraculously been liberated. Her walk home down Broadway seemed but a step, yet it covered thirteen blocks.

In the quiet of her room, she went through the news-

papers carefully. The business slump was already reflected in the "Help Wanted" and "Situation Wanted" columns. Had she come to New York six months earlier she could easily have been located. Now it bade fair to be a problem.

There were but a handful of advertisements for stenographers, most of them requesting replies to box numbers. Isabel laboriously wrote several letters in reply and mailed them before going to bed. She slept soundly; the day had been a strain.

Next morning after breakfast she found a room, fourth floor back on West 13th Street near Seventh Avenue. It was gaunt and cheerless but seemed clean. The rent was fifteen dollars a week payable in advance. She knew that Bohemia was near by, a few blocks south. It was not that Isabel craved the casual, irresponsible life attributed to Greenwich Village, but she did hunger for a circle in which ideas were discussed whether or not they were original.

Crossing lower Fifth Avenue, she was brought up short by a window filled with books and two or three examples of sculpture. A sign proclaimed it the studio of the editor whose response to Emerson's challenge, re-echoing in Isabel's life, had brought her to New York. A printed card announced a lecture to be given there by him that evening, "Admission \$1." She resolved to go, even though she felt she should conserve every nickel.

During the morning Isabel registered at several employment agencies. All were pessimistic, and admitted that they had found it very difficult to place girls for some weeks past. Returning to her room she went through the morning papers. She clipped three or four advertisements to be answered by mail and applied at an office on Fourth Avenue for an opening which directed responses in person.

The room was packed and an overflow stood about the corridor. The scene disheartened her. After waiting

for half an hour, they were sent away. A candidate had been selected. Isabel felt utterly abandoned. Why had she chosen so inauspicious a moment to fling her dice on the board of life, she reflected bitterly. A year previous her chances would have been so much better.

But the day was sunny and as she walked homeward her spirits improved. There was so much to look at. Never, she felt, could she experience in New York moods of such utter gray desolation as tortured her at home. She devoted an hour to answering the morning's meagre grist of advertisements; then, as there seemed nothing further to be done, she went out sight-seeing.

Taking the subway at Union Square, she emerged at Brooklyn Bridge. The Gothic grace of the Woolworth spire stirred her and she took pleasure in seeking out a vista through an arch of the Municipal Building which she had once seen in a photograph. But what impressed her more profoundly was the East River and Brooklyn Bridge. She preferred it with its grim granite piers to the newer bridge to the north. Wall Street interested her, but it was a glimpse of the Singer Tower from the east through a narrow street which held her longest. Isabel had an eye for composition. She looked enviously at the hurrying stenographers who thronged the streets at lunch hour. They had jobs.

A cheap restaurant sufficed for lunch. Then she rode up to the Metropolitan Museum. The impossibility of seeing it all was clearly apparent, and she elected the pictures. Isabel's taste was unsophisticated. She could sense the palpable power of Sorolla; she passed Manet's "Girl with a Parrot" without a second glance. But Rembrandt's "Old Lady Cutting her Nails" brought her up standing, and the serene beauty of the Barbizon men found a genuine response.

She returned to her room by a Fifth Avenue bus as the sun was setting. And Fifth Avenue on a November afternoon has shaken less responsive souls than hers:

the nervous tempo of the scene; the impetuous charge of the traffic at the shifting of the lights; the beautiful women, beautifully gowned; the sense of life, full flavored, lavishly spent. Isabel rode clear to the Arch and walked back to her room, picking up the two or three evening papers which she had already learned carried the Help Wanted advertisements. She replied to two of them, scratched a vaguely worded postal to her mother, and went out to dinner.

Eight-thirty found her entering the Editor's studio. The room slowly filled, but it was nearly nine before the speaker appeared. Isabel studied him closely as he pottered about with a couple of books to which apparently he intended to refer later.

An ugly, saturnine face with a look of tremendous power, large, projecting ears, a heavy moustache of an old-fashioned type, a strong jaw in repose, the man's face in part explained his career. But only in part. Egotism, headstrong self-assurance, combativeness; these traits were apparent. But his compassion, his inevitable championship of the under dog, his reckless contempt for public opinion though the price be imprisonment, these were facets which caught the light only as he revealed himself in his talk.

He was announced to speak on Lloyd George, but very soon he was deep in reminiscences of London literary and political life of the past twenty years. It was improvisation. The claim sometimes made that the man knew intimately more leaders of his time than any other in the world seemed no overstatement. Isabel promptly divined that his verdicts were deeply colored by his prejudices, but she hung upon his every word. This man had lived. He had grasped life firmly and the nettle had proved harmless. Nothing could rob him of the richness of his experience. He had grown to his fullest possibilities because he had sought and found the soil from which the roots of his being could draw their required

sustenance. His career vindicated her step whatever its outcome. And then came the thought, "But he was sustained by a sense of his talent, an assurance later justified."

Nevertheless something of the speaker's strength seemed imparted to her, and she walked home not with a quiet certainty that she would win but with a feeling that come what would she would waste no time in vain regrets. That evening she dropped a line to the Martha Washington giving forwarding instructions for her mail. She did not know that every advertisement to which she replied brought a hundred responses and that her chances were still further reduced by a lack of local references.

Day followed day in this ceaseless search for work. The employment agencies offered nothing. Not one reply was vouchsafed to her letters. Isabel began to despair. On Sunday her hopes revived. There were more than twenty openings for stenographers in the *Times* alone. Three of them requested calls in person.

Bright and early Monday morning she found herself one of a crowd of girls in a Broad Street commission merchant's. The fifth applicant, a pretty girl dressed in expensive furs, secured the opening.

"It's a fright," remarked one of the disappointed candidates. "I've been trying to land something for three weeks."

"I'll say it's a fright," replied another, a woman in her early thirties. "Reminds me of 1907 when I was just out of Packard's."

The two other calls proved fruitless. That afternoon Isabel took inventory. She had paid her second week's room rent in advance. It left her twenty-nine dollars. It was clear that she had but this week. Tuesday morning brought no replies to her sheaf of Sunday letters. That day she began looking for any kind of work. But either the pay was hopelessly insufficient to sustain life, as in

the case of envelope addressing, or some experience was required as for operating a Bonnaz machine, a profession the nature of which she never did discover, so contemptuous of her presumption was the foreman to whom she applied.

By Friday she was beaten. She knew it when she found she lacked the courage to call at a Park Row address which she had seen in the *Morning World*. It was rainy and she sat in her cheerless room in a lethargy, staring at the wall with unseeing eyes. She could not remain in New York; to return to her home seemed quite as impossible. There seemed no place for her in life. She believed that she had the capacity for happiness and contentment. Her demands were modest. But the blind force which sent the globe spinning in space had dealt her a losing hand. What was the use of continuing the hideous farce?

She put on her coat and splashed through the sooty rain to a neighboring lunch room. She felt that an actual physical burden pressed achingly upon her head. The cheap, synthetic substitute for food nauseated her. She ate but little. The movie which she attended that afternoon made so little impression on the self-absorbed girl that she could not recall its theme when she came out. Her sleep that night was heavy and dreamless like that, so it is said, of condemned murderers prior to their execution.

The morning train for Boston found her aboard. She dreaded to face her mother; the thought of her father was impossible. And she would have the same hopeless search for work in Boston; worse than in New York for she would bear the burden of her parents' condemnation.

Throughout the six hour journey she sat huddled in a despairing heap scarcely noting the bare fields and leafless woodlands. When she alighted at her street in the slaty afternoon her heart sank. She would never escape. She was hopelessly trapped. As she approached the

house she noted a hearse and several hacks standing before it.

"Old Mrs. Hodgkins has gone," she reflected.

The Hodgkins lived on the ground floor and the old lady, a paralytic, had for months been on the threshold.

A knot of school children, awed yet deliciously intrigued, made way for her to enter the open door. She climbed the stairs. The Hodgkins' door was closed. From above she heard a nasal voice intoning the burial service.

"For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

"So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

Startled, she stood in her own doorway surveyed by the roomful of people sitting in rows of folding chairs. She heard her mother's sobs. In the bay window, impressive at last in his silent dignity, lay her father. Some one made room for her by her mother; the momentary confusion subsided and the service continued to the end. Then amid a din of scraping chairs the coffin was borne to the waiting hearse.

During the drive to Woodlawn she heard the story. Her father had been discharged the day of her flight. He was fifty-two years old and the future looked black. All that week he had sought work without avail. Only a few hundred dollars stood between him and that destitution, the ever present fear of which had explained his parsimony. The previous Sunday for the first time in years he had failed to attend church.

He had sat about the house, Mrs. Tasker explained, as though he lacked life to bestir himself. "And he'd say

hardly a word," she added. "It didn't seem like Charles."

Monday and Tuesday he complained of pains in his head. Wednesday afternoon when Mrs. Tasker returned from buying some groceries she found him dead in his chair.

" 'A stroke,' Doctor Hillis called it, but I say it was a broken heart," she concluded.

Isabel, who sat pale and dry-eyed during the recital while the carriage rattled and rocked over the unkempt roads, reflected that her mother was perhaps right. As she gazed over the dun marshes the thought came to her that probably many people were thus slain by life. She had never loved her father, but now she felt a certain sympathy and understanding which brought her closer. The world had not handled him gently. Many of the traits which had alienated her had sprung from the stress of the struggle.

Then as she contemplated the future which seemed at best to spell but drab monotony, she found it in her heart to envy the man in the hearse. He had found surcease from the battle. He was beaten but now he was at peace. Before her stretched an endless vista of barren years consecrated to the bitter business of wresting a living from a stupid but dangerous adversary, the adversary before whom her father had gone down to defeat.

TWO POEMS

By RAYMOND KNISTER

OCTOBER STARS

Was it the frenzied whisper
Of covert wind to obdurate apple-boughs,
(Leaves sheltering no more fruit)
Or the paled sky drawing in,
Or the peal of a shooting-star
Across the night?
Or did all these
And the tame apple-smell
Through the wind in your hair
Make me to long
For an end to life?

REVERIE: THE ORCHARD ON THE SLOPE

Thin ridges of land unploughed
Along the tree-rows
Covered with long cream grasses
Wind-torn.
Brown sand between them,
Blue boughs above.

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Row and row of waves ever
In the breaking;
Ever in arching and convulsed
Imminence;
Roll of muddy sea between;
Low clouds down-pressing
And pallid and streaming rain.

CORPUTT

By TUPPER GREENWALD

Five nights ago I saw Professor Corputt for the first time in twenty years. He was staying at his old place at Mrs. Schreiner's. I found him, of course, changed, in all respects save one — his passion for *Lear*. I was with him for two hours or so; and I went away worried and, I admit, afraid. I don't know of what.

And now this morning Mrs. McMurtree, my housekeeper, who teaches English in the night high school, brought up to my room with my breakfast a copy of the Marlin University *Crier*. Standing in the doorway, she said:

"Old Professor Corputt is dead, according to the *Crier* — died three nights ago, and — would you believe it? — with a copy of *Lear* that he had written out in long-hand, under his pillow. Delivered a magnificent lecture on *Lear* about a year ago before The Avonians. Eighty-one . . . well . . . If you don't like the coffee, call down to me and I'll bring you tea — if you like."

"Thank you," I murmured, and shut the door after her.

That last summer with Professor Corputt, twenty years ago, comes back to me as a time of soft sounds and winds and grave-green trees — of mellowness and village quiet. We both of us wore life like a cool and soft and lovable old coat. There were hours when neither of us said a word, when we walked the long, white streets of Marlin like two affectionate ghosts, and found calm pleasure in the sight of small bright windows in the waning day, of chimneys against the sky, of old drowsy men on gray piazzas. We heard old horses champ under trees, and saw the long fringe on the tops of buggies wave with the wind.

Now and then we nodded to villagers who looked at us as if in wonder and irritation at our being in Marlin-

town now that it was mid-August and Marlin College was deserted. Our presence was a remembrancer, I suppose, of nights in October when young men with long sideburns rolled barrels through the convent quiet of the streets, and with wild shouts and dances burned them in front of Marshal Coburn's house — when young men lashed other young men to trees, put buckets smeared with asafetida over their heads, coated their bodies lavishly with yellow paint, and left them thus to dry until morning.

Small wonder — since we reminded the Marliners, moreover, of riots in the Playhouse, of brazen philanderings under trees, of bombs under cider-barrels, of clamors, larcenies, vices everywhere, and of maudlin cup-quaffings at Gerstenburg's Inn — small wonder that Corputt and I were looked upon with suspicion. But we didn't care, so engrossed were we in each other — so thoroughly were we content with life. We nodded to the villagers with the utmost perfunctoriness, we two surface-gentlemen. We took a certain martyr's delight in being ostracized and condemned. And so we lived serenely alone.

Our days we spent in the greenness and quietude of the country surrounding Marlin, our nights in the village streets and in Gerstenburg's, where over mugs of rare ale and between bites of bratwurst sandwiches, Professor Corputt talked of the plays and novels he had intended at one time or another to write, and read to me out of *Lear*.

I wonder if I can at all make clear to you the aspect of the man when I say that he had the look of the disappointed writer — the man who feels in his youth the creative urge, is compelled to earn a living, chooses teaching as the best means of doing it, and then, in the end, finds his creative self frustrated by his academic. He was a gray man of medium height with gray eyes, thin, sensitive lips, and delicate, unforgettable hands that had a way of caressing the leaves of books; a man

of small, precise movements, who seemed to know always where he was going and what he was to do, — quiet-mannered and firm; a neat man. Probably the only forward thing about him was the part in his hair; it was always straight and rather severe, but never, for two successive days, in the same place. He had fine silver hair that looked as though it might be phosphorescent at night; and a thin, hungry neck which he knew was thin and hungry and which he therefore concealed with high linen collars.

When I think of his voice, I think of the way in which he read to us in English 38, *Green Grow the Rashers O*, — in a small, precious voice, halting, dry, distinct, with inescapable Scotch in it, the precise, delicate lip-movements accompanied by shy little movements of the gray head. He trilled his r's gracefully and robustly; his o's came with flower-like pursings of the lips, and unmatchably piquant raisings of the eyebrow:

“Her 'prentice hand she tried on man,
And then she made — the lasses-O!”

Throughout the reading he stood erect and motionless, and at the end, with a quick, restrained smile he lowered his book, moved one trim little foot an inch or two, and forthwith drifted into quiet, appreciative comment.

At Gerstenburg's, sipping his ale and munching his sandwiches, he lost a good deal of his accustomed reserve and shyness. Often he talked with a buoyancy of gesture that made me want, in a keen and hungry way, to be like him. I remember that during those holiday nights I wanted to stroke his hair and run my hand along his smooth-pale cheek. He was then sixty or so, an established Professor of English; I, twenty-four, an absurd and teething instructor. At sixty, he talked to me of his desire to write.

“You know,” he said, “ideas come to me, and I jot them down, but that is as far as I ever get. I can talk

about beautiful things, I can appreciate them, and I can sometimes make other people appreciate them; but I cannot for the life of me create beautiful things."

"Well," I said, "I don't think you have the time — nor the stimulation. This place here is . . ."

"H'm!" he murmured with an opaque look, "I'm not so sure about that. . . . Oh, well. . . . Hadn't we better get some more ale?"

Mr. Jake Gerstenburg brought us ale.

"At any rate," Corputt said, stroking with affectionately soft fingers a small red book, "here is a great play. I don't say that *Lear* is as fine structurally as, say, *Macbeth* or *Othello*, but in grandeur, strength, and human appeal, I think it is Shakespeare's best. Each day, as I grow older, I like it more and more. Listen. . . ."

And then, in the precious, halting voice, with head up-lifted, he read the lines which he did not have to read, for he had long ago memorized the whole play:

"Cordelia:

'We are not the first

Who, with best meaning, have incurred the worst.

For thee, oppressed king, I am cast down.

Myself could else outfrown false fortune's frown.

Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?' "

Then Corputt said: "Consider Lear's reply:

'No, no, no, no. Come, let's away to prison.

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.

When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down

And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live

And sing and pray and tell old tales, and laugh

At gilded butterflies. . . .'

"A man," he murmured intensely, "might begin to write a play like *Lear*, and finishing it, go contentedly to his grave.

'We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel
down . . .'

I could go on reading that forever."

"Yes," said I, "it has a real poetic quality — not as stiff as a good many other speeches in the play, I think."

There was a long quiet, during which the Professor, staring at his ale mug, softly intoned Lear's words. Followed then silence, until I murmured,

"A great play."

"Yes, a great play," and then in a less assured tone, "Some day I may rummage through those notebooks of mine, and fabricate something — a play, perhaps. I don't expect to teach forever. . . ."

I thought of a play written by Professor Corputt that had been presented by The Avonians, the Marlin College actors.

"That play of yours that The Avonians presented last year — I liked it immensely."

"H'm!"

"Have you tried it with a publisher or a producer?" I asked, as he stroked his chin with his fingers.

"No, no. I destroyed the thing two weeks after it was acted," he replied.

"Oh. . . ."

It grew on towards midnight. Corputt read more of *Lear* — read with such fervor and appreciativeness that though, frankly, I did not care so much at the time for the play as I did, say, for *Hamlet*, I began sincerely to like it. After a half dozen snatches here and there, he returned to that last scene between Lear and Cordelia:

"'We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing. . . .'

Not, perhaps, the greatest passage in the play, but I like it best." His fingers were fondling the leaves of the book.

We said nothing for a long time, merely sipped our ale. Soon the Professor looked up at the brown, broad-beamed ceiling, and drummed with his fingers on the heavy oak table.

"Suppose we go now," he suggested.

Jake Gerstenburg gave us a broad "Goodnight!" as we made for the door. We were outside on the small piazza when the great Jake suddenly cried, "Hey!" Then he pushed outward the small wicker door, and said, "Here, you forgot this."

"Thank you — very much," said Corputt. "Stupid of me to forget it. I guess I had better put *Lear* into my pocket."

We walked out into a night that glowed with warm stars and street-lamps. A great white moon glided complacently in the sky like a splendid duck in a lake. The Professor remarked on the whiteness of the streets — and I on the voices that came whispering to us from the piazzas.

"The village boys are attacking in full force, now that the students are gone," I said.

"Seems so," murmured Corputt, and then after a while, "You'd better put up with me at Mrs. Schreiner's tonight."

"All right — if you want me to."

"We'll go tramping in the morning — or shall it be fishing?"

"Let's do both."

And so passed many a night and day of that summer.

August dwindled away into saffron September. Came then to me an invitation from the dean of the English department of a large university in the West, to take an instructorship under him. I had been recommended by Professor Corputt.

"You had better go," said the Professor. "It means advancement, and I think you'll be broadened by the life. Besides, the dean is a great fellow."

On the day I departed, the sun was brick-red. Corputt and I remarked on it as we stood at the station waiting for my train to arrive. Minutes passed; the train came.

"May I give you this?" said Corputt, handing me his small red copy of *Lear*.

"Thank you — thank you," I said, and as we clasped hands, "I'll write to you as soon as I arrive."

"Well, don't forget."

Just before boarding the train, I remember saying,

"Don't forget to write that play, Professor. Make it a great one."

He waved to me as the train pulled out of Marlin — a small, gray, rather wan old man with glistening-black shoes. . . .

Immediately upon my arrival, I dispatched a letter to Corputt — a style-conscious thing effusive with gratitude and bulging with reminiscence. I liked my new situation pretty well, I said; the first taste was not disagreeable. (Five years later I hated the place as a hell of dullness and futility. The dean turned out to be a crassly benevolent old bear who every now and then bowled one over with a great swipe of the paw.)

For five years Corputt and I wrote to each other, arranging always to spend the summer together. But "circumstances prevented".

"Next year, then," he wrote. "By next year I shall have given up my position at Marlin. Then I may do something in a creative way. I am old — but remember De Morgan. . . ."

Our correspondence grew laggard, and after eight years, ceased altogether. We were worlds apart. We ran out of talk, and, I suppose, simultaneously lost interest in each other's letters. When I felt mine becoming artificial, I decided to stop writing. Moreover, I was always infernally busy.

I had spent twenty years under the great bear-dean, when President Hattersley of Marlin University (not College any longer) offered me a position as head of the English department. I accepted — rejoicing at the opportunity to escape from the bear and from his damp cave of obviousness and mediocrity.

I came back to a Marlin that was not quite so large as I had expected it to be. I had been rather dazzled by the fine quality of the paper on which President Hattersley had written to me. I saw the old yellow College of Arts now painted a forbidding slate-gray; its cupola, a feeble salmon. I was, however, glad to see that its windows were clean. (There was a time when the faculty had congratulated itself on their academic sootiness.) Where a delightful knoll had once been now stood the College of Technology, a building that in its newness shone like a rubber collar. And in the village, near the library, stood a recently affiliated institution, the College of Dentistry.

During my talk with President Hattersley, I asked about Professor Corputt, whom I had well-nigh forgotten during the time we had not written to each other.

"He was retired eight years ago at his own request — retired with a substantial stipend, of course. He must be eighty or so, now," said the President, pursing his lips.

"Yes, I know. Does he still live at Mrs. Schreiner's place?"

"I think so. The truth is, I haven't seen him for — oh, at least six months. A year ago he gave an excellent lecture on *Lear*. Since then he hasn't been about very much. He's rather frail now, but full of energy, of course. The last time I saw him, he told me he was going to write a play. Remarkable ambition for so old a man — don't you think?"

I decided to see my old friend. After all, I had been ungentlemanly and inconsiderate in not having written to him. Perhaps he had been hurt by my indifference. I thought of those splendid summers we had spent to-

gether, of the tramps in the woods and the walks along the village streets, of the nights in Gerstenburg's, and of *Lear*. . . .

A dun house, Mrs. Schreiner's, with a long, creaking piazza, a tall, thin door, and uncurtained windows that looked black in the night. A gas-jet was wavering with the little night-breeze that whipped in and out of the hallway. I pulled the bell-knob.

"Yes, Dr. Corputt is upstairs — his old room, you know," said Mrs. Schreiner, who when last I had seen her, was much stouter and far less angular and severe than she seemed now. I did not like the shiny black satin of her dress, nor the glint of her jet earrings. I was, frankly, glad when she went back into the house.

Professor Corputt did not immediately answer my knock. I waited; heard the groan of a bedspring, the shuffle of slippers, and then the door opened.

"N-no, no — I haven't forgotten you. Well. . . . I hadn't expected ever to see you again, Frank," said the small, precious voice, which I scarcely heard on account of the look in the eyes — gray eyes with eyelids childlike in their pinkness, eyes that seemed very close to mine, so very close that, for the moment, they dazzled me.

But the voice was far off — like that of a man calling to me across a cold, glassy lake, calling as though he feared he might not be heard.

We stood in the doorway, my hand in his, for a long time.

"Hadn't you better come in?" he said, tugging gently at my hand with his bony fingers. "I have a great deal to tell you — a very great deal to tell you. . . ."

I was a bit unnerved by the way in which I towered over him. He was such an absurdly little man in his brown dressing-robe, with his small hairless head on a tissue-paper neck, and his (so it seemed in the chiaroscuro of the room) slightly swollen ears.

"Sit down."

Intent now upon his eyes, now upon his hands, I sat down in a chair near a manuscript-littered table. He sat opposite me on the bed, his feet scarcely touching the floor.

There was talk for more than two hours, a slow, hesitant stream of explanation, narrative, and reminiscence. Pebbly small talk. . . . Several times he laughed with abandon — a staccato of cackles subsiding in queer little vibrations of the chest. He had lost his teeth. . . .

"You have a cold," I remarked.

"Well, what can one expect?" he said with a yawn.

"And you are sleepy. Hadn't I better leave now, and come tomorrow?"

He seemed to take offense at this:

"Don't leave. . . . I haven't seen you for twenty years, and I — I have a great deal to tell you."

Silence. . . . My eyes looked long and steadily at the floor.

"Frank," he said with some hesitation, "I — d'you remember? — I once said something about a play I was going to write. You remember. . . ."

Before I could say anything, his hand went under a pillow and emerged with a thick manuscript.

"I finished this last night," with a nervous toss of the head; his fingers were fondling the pages. "Not, perhaps, a great play, but I am confident that it has elements of greatness in it."

I stared.

"The germinal idea came to me only three weeks ago. Since then, I have been writing incessantly, with a speed that has astonished me, and I — finished last night."

The voice dwindled off into stillness. He looked at me with opaque eyes — then smiled a slow vague smile revealing his toothless gums. I felt as though I were standing on the edge of a precipice. . . . He chorled.

"No, I shan't read the whole of it to you. That would take too long. It is all in blank verse, a medium which, I have found, is very natural with me. Let me read you the best speech in it — that is, what I think is the best speech. You may disagree with me after you've read the play through. Well, it is spoken by the protagonist, an old king, Lear, who has been mistreated by his daughters; and"

And then, in the voice that re-echoes in my brain as I write this, he read:

"No, no, no, no. Come, let's away to prison.

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.

When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down

And ask of thee forgiveness. . . ."

TO ONE GROWING OLD

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER, JR.

You begged for Time, and they have given you Time,
Days like water brimming the bowl of years —
Fields stained with poppies, sloping hills to climb,
And merry laughter, and the gift of tears;
They have given you windless days of summer light,
Winters of ice, frost on autumnal eves,
A scarf of stars whirled on the throat of night,
And sapphire rain that danced among the leaves.
But now you turn away and beg no more,
Though Time has given you wine and flowers and fruit,
Because you think he mocks your growing old,
Taking away all he bestowed before,
To offer you, when you are blind and mute,
Last gifts of all, darkness and bitter mold.

GARDEN DUSK

By ADRIAN LAMB

In snowy dusk
With stealthy step
I took me in secret
To a wondrous place
Where all was white
And still
But for the noise of
Downy flakes in
Dainty lispings crash
Against old leaves
Of dingy oaks,
And in that place
I found new flowers,
Gaunt weed frames
A-crown with soft white tufts —
Ghost blooms
That topped with rare strange grace
The ragweed
And its lowly tribe —
Ghost blooms
In the hour of dusk,
In a place that was still and white.

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